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Attorney general targets St. Paul's for handling of sexual misconduct allegations

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CONCORD — The Attorney General's Office has launched a criminal investigation into whether St. Paul's School engaged in conduct constituting "endangering the welfare of a child" and potential obstruction of justice in connection with the prestigious boarding school's handling of sexual misconduct allegations.

According to a news release from Attorney General Gordon MacDonald, the investigation was launched as a result of a 2017 report concerning sexual assaults by St. Paul's teachers on their students; student sexual conquest rituals such as the "senior salute," a practice which led to the highly publicized arrest, trial and conviction of former St. Paul's student Owen Labrie in 2015; and allegations of a similar ritual reported in June of this year.



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The Attorney General's Office, working with the Merrimack County Attorney's Office, Concord and state police, will focus initially on the issue of whether St. Paul's School staff engaged in conduct constituting endangering the welfare of a child in violation of RSA 639:3; and additional violations of RSA ch. 642, the Obstructing Governmental Operations chapter of the criminal code.

"This is just the start of this investigation," Associate Attorney General Jane Young said Thursday night. "I anticipate this will be a very lengthy process. I urge anyone with additional information to come forward."

When asked if the investigation could eventually result in criminal charges against the school or staff, Young said it is too early in the process to comment.

"We'll go where the evidence takes us," said Young.

"Protection of children is a paramount priority for law enforcement," said MacDonald. "I am confident that an institution such as St. Paul's School will be fully cooperative with this investigation as it has pledged that '[t]he safety and well-being of all students remains [its] highest priority,'" referring to a statement posted June 30 to the school's website, attributed to St. Paul's School Rector Mike Hirschfeld.

St. Paul's School hired an outside investigator in June to look into new allegations of sexual misconduct involving students. Hirschfeld told the New Hampshire Union Leader that the investigator will review the allegations and talk to the students involved "to get to the bottom of what took place," and if it's proven that any "improper behavior" took place or the school's code of conduct was violated said "there will be swift and immediate consequences for those students who were involved."

On Thursday night, Hirschfeld issued a statement saying the school has been in "close contact" with law enforcement officials regarding their investigation.

"We will continue to fully cooperate with any inquiries we receive," said Hirschfeld. "We also intend to work closely with the Attorney General's Office to answer any and all questions regarding the independent report issued last month. Our goal is and always will be the health, safety and well-being of our students. We will work tirelessly to meet that goal and strengthen the public's faith in St. Paul's School."

National spotlight

St. Paul's School was in the national spotlight during the 2015 sexual assault trial of former student Owen Labrie. That case focused on a secret tradition known as "Senior Salute," in which senior boys competed to seduce younger girls.

Labrie was convicted of misdemeanor sexual assault, felony use of a computer to lure a minor for sex and endangering the welfare of a child; he has appealed to the New Hampshire Supreme Court.

Attorney Charles G. Douglas III represents the family of Chessy Prout, the former St. Paul's freshman who was sexually assaulted by Labrie and later revealed her identity to the world when she told her story on "The Today Show."

Douglas said Prout family members are "pleased" with the news of the investigation.

"On behalf of the family, they are pleased the attorney general has stepped up to the plate and shown the courage to take on a very large but secretive institution that needs the light of day," said Douglas, who is representing the Prout family in a federal lawsuit filed against St. Paul's School. "We have long known that this was a pattern and it needs to stop."

13 cases substantiated

In May, St. Paul's announced the findings of an independent investigation that substantiated 13

cases of sexual misconduct by faculty and staff involving students going back decades. In a letter to the St. Paul's School community, Hirschfeld apologized "to survivors for the wrongs that were done to them at St. Paul's School."

In late June, police confirmed they were investigating a report of a sexual assault by one student against another that took place on campus in May.

Amanda Grady Sexton, director of public affairs for the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, commended the Attorney General's Office for their investigation of St. Paul's School.

"They are right to shine a light on the darkness that continues to surround this school," said Sexton. "The administration's practice of hiring outside 'investigators' to determine whether to report suspected criminal activity to law enforcement points to a culture that places the school's reputation far above the health and safety of the children entrusted to its care. Elite boarding schools are in many ways exceptional, but they are not above the law. While administrators at St. Paul's School recently disclosed a decades-long history of sexual assault and misconduct on campus, they seem to be unwilling or unable to comprehend the ongoing problem unfolding right in front of their eyes today. This investigation is an opportunity for the School to assess the reality of sexual misconduct on their campus and take the proper steps to craft model policies, establish a prevention plan, train faculty, and connect students to support services."

Young urged anyone with information regarding criminal conduct at St. Paul's School to contact Investigator Mark Myrdek at 271-1263 or e-mail him directly at Mark.Myrdek@doj.nh.gov.